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Adult Poetry—First Place

Our Place

By Madelaine Colarossi, Glen Elder, KS

Fresh cement
poured next to mine
on a walkway into heaven.
Or at least that's what we called it.

Little handprint
stuck next to mine
building a walkway into heaven.
Or at least that's what it looks like.

Long ago dates
scrawled into grey mud
on a walkway into heaven.
At least it will help us remember.

Grandpa's grave
stuck at the end
of our walkway into heaven.

He told me he would be fine.

Youth Autobiography—First Place

High School

by Piper Patterson, Marysville, KS

High school is full of secrets and backstabbing. Girls are spiteful, cruel, and vindictive, but, at the end of the day, we still call one another friends. The way high school girls act amazes me because everyone is so vicious toward each other, but everybody is "best friends".

I moved to Marysville in seventh grade; I'm now a freshman, yet I'm still treated like an outsider. Moving to a new school is hard for anyone. I didn't really talk to anyone until basketball season started, so I used that to connect to people.

In eighth grade I had to be taken out of sports because I broke my arm cheerleading. All of my friends were playing basketball, but I couldn't because my arm was in a cast all the way to my

shoulder. It was really hard to not play any sports because I am a very athletic person. They had team bonding and everyone was there but I couldn't be because I didn't play. It upset me that I couldn't grow closer to my team but some of the girls didn't want me there anyway.

Recently one of the girls in my class threw a little get together for everyone to hangout. She invited everyone, except me. This girl even invited my boyfriend, he asked if it was an invitation for the both of us and she specifically said she didn't want me there. It didn't really hurt my feelings that she didn't invite me because I'm not very fond of her, but she invited my boyfriend just to spite me. She asked everyone what I was saying about not being invited, but she never even acknowledged me or even asked me how I felt. I found it pretty funny that some of the girls I call my best friends went to that party considering how she was talking about me trying to be hurtful.

Most girls are just fair-weather friends. They acknowledge you're their friend when nobody else is there. I've never experienced this until I moved to Marysville. I thought some of the girls were my best friends but as soon as they had someone else to be with, they were gone

as soon as they could be. Not all girls are like that but quite a bit are, honestly, it's really sad they can't be good friends to people.

High school is full of petty drama that doesn't matter, and everyone gets involved. It may seem like a big deal now, but in the long run it won't matter. Girls are just vicious and mean, it's how it's always been, but if you just keep being positive everything will work out.

Adult Autobiography—First Place

A Unique Gift From Czar Alexander II Of Russia

by Janice O. McIntosh, Lawrence, KS

This is a little known, but fascinating story of a special piece of history in our family archives.

It was a dark dreary evening on that Halloween night of 1957 when my husband of just over one year and I arrived in Mason city, Iowa. One could almost visualize witches gliding through the sky on lighted broomsticks, goblins peering out from behind bushes and toothless pumpkins smiling from porches.

We were about to embark on the first big adventure of our married lives. Merlyn had accepted a job as a trainee for J. C. Penny Company and we were both looking forward to his new career in the world of business, following his recent graduation from Kansas State University in August. I was six months pregnant with our first baby and a bright future lay ahead for both of us as new parents with a new job.

First of all, we drove past the J. C. Penny store with its lighted windows featuring various fashion models which was located on Federal Avenue, the main street of Mason City. Next we located a restaurant called "The Green Lantern" where we had an excellent fried chicken dinner. But it was our next venture that would change our lives forever!

Shortly, before we left Manhattan, my mother said to me: "I've been told that I have a cousin who lives in Mason City. I have never met her but I have heard she is a wonderful lady. You might want to call her."

Following dinner, I suggested to Merlyn that we call Mother's cousin. He agreed and we found a pay phone in the restaurant. An older lady answered and I told her who we were. Without any hesitation she said, "If you are free, why don't you come on over?"

That sounded like fun and we agreed. She gave us directions to her home which fortunately wasn't too difficult to find in this new city.

When we reached 76 Crescent Drive and rang the bell, a lady with snow white hair and a warm smile answered the door. She said, "Come in, come in. I look forward to getting to know you!" We entered a beautiful living room with a multi-colored Oriental rug, a gold velvet upholstered couch and walnut side chairs flanking a flickering fireplace with blue and orange flames dancing gracefully behind the fire screen. She motioned us to sit on the beautiful couch and took a Queen Anne chair right across from us.

After our introductions, I explained to her what Mother had said and she exclaimed, "I knew your Grandmother Dean well and always enjoyed being with her. Now I have the privilege of getting to know both of you!"

We visited a short time, and soon another lady appeared with a silver tray with four china coffee cups filled with steaming coffee and a plate of delicious home-made chocolate chip cookies. Belle introduced her as her friend Cora, who was visiting her. We spent a pleasant evening getting to know each other. Belle inquired about where we planned to live. Merlyn told her we didn't know as yet. She said, "I have a good friend and I think she has an apartment for rent. Would you like for me to phone her?" We happily agreed. Belle went to the phone and returned smiling. "Mrs. Irons still has a the apartment available and would be happy to show it to you tomorrow evening."

We were overjoyed and agreed to contact Mrs. Irons. The next evening we saw the apartment and it was perfect, with a very reasonable rent. The moving truck was to arrive in two more days, and we were relieved to have a place for our furniture rather than placing it in storage.

Belle wasted no time in helping us become acquainted in our new city. She came by and picked me up to go grocery shopping. She invited us to the Congregational Church and introduced us around as her new cousins. She often included me in luncheons with her friends and really made us feel part of Mason City. Many other times, Belle invited us to be her special guests at a restaurant at Clear Lake. She always let Merlyn drive her new Cadillac, which was a real thrill for him.

Our son Craig was born on March 11th, 1958. Belle instantly welcomed him into the family, with lots of love and attention. She was Aunt, Godmother, and Grandmother all rolled into one special lady. Our lives as new parents were greatly enriched by her kindness, generosity and goodwill. In the days ahead, Belle made a special effort to make us feel welcome. Since we were 450 miles from our parents, Belle always included us at Christmas or Thanksgiving for a very festive dinner for at least 12 other close friends and family members.

Belle hated to see us leave, and we felt the same way toward her. However, Merlyn decided to go back to graduate school for a Master's Degree in Social Work. We sadly packed our belongs before we departed for Columbia, Missouri.

On one of our last visits before we left, she said, "I have something for you." She brought out a beautiful woolen rug with a man on horseback hunting a buffalo. It was really gorgeous!

Belle then told us a fascinating story. The rug had been given to her father, A. T. Parker, by the Czar of Russia as a thank you gift for her father's hospitality to his son, the Grand Duke Alexis, during the Great Buffalo Hunt of 1872. According to family folklore, Belle's father was on that hunt at some point, and after Alexis returned to Russia, his father, Czar Alexander II, sent Belle's father a richly woven wool rug depicting Grand Duke Alexis hunting buffalo. The rug was so lifelike that it seemed like a full color photograph. I was speechless at Belle's kindness in giving us such a valuable gift.

We took the rug with us when we left Mason City, but continued our wonderful friendship with Belle. Merlyn embarked on his new career as a graduate student, and then became a social worker. I was busy raising a family, so I thought little about the exquisite gift packed carefully away in mothballs and stored on a high closet shelf where it would remain safe. But as the years rolled by, I became curious about the history of the buffalo rug and the Great Buffalo Hunt of 1872.

My research showed that the Czar Alexander II had sent his son, the Grand Duke Alexis, to the United States on a goodwill mission. Alexis was only twenty when he arrived on American shores from Russia. He did have a brief meeting with then President Grant, but there was no formal reception due to the frosty relationship between Russia and the U.S. at this time. The Duke took the snub in stride and participated happily in all the parades and other entertainment planned for him in New York, New Orleans, and Denver. He enjoyed himself immensely!

But the Grand Duke's favorite part of his American visit was the Great Buffalo Hunt, which took place in Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado. On his twenty second birthday, January second, 1872, the first day of the Buffalo Hunt arrived. General Sheridan, General Custer, and Buffalo Bill Cody were all a part of the famous hunt. There were many cavalry riders and soldiers accompanying them.

Buffalo Bill was put in charge of the Grand Duke, to make sure the Russian aristocrat had a successful hunt. Alexis started out with a pistol with American and Russian insignias on it, which had been a gift, but he was a wild shot and the buffalo were too far away to hit. Buffalo Bill Cody offered Alexis his rifle, and told him exactly where to stand in order to shoot a buffalo successfully. At last, Alexis downed a buffalo! Everyone cheered and there was a celebration which included champagne.

Prior to the buffalo hunt, Buffalo Bill discussed the hunt with Spotted Tail, Chief of the Brule Lakota. The chief agreed to come to the hunt with six hundred warriors from various Sioux tribes. The Indians demonstrated various dances and reenacted their way of shooting buffalo.

The Indians were rewarded for their kindness with flour, sugar, coffee, and a thousand pounds of tobacco. There were twenty five wagon loads of gifts for the Indians.

Grand Duke Alexis loved his new sport so much that it is said he shot two buffalo from the window of his train as it passed near McPherson, Kansas. Some say he killed twenty five buffalo

altogether. When he left Pensacola on the 22nd of February, 1872, it is reported he had hundreds of pounds of iced buffalo meat stored aboard his ship.

I looked at the buffalo rug with new appreciation; I had no idea it had such a fascinating history. I felt a rush of gratitude toward Belle for giving us such an exquisite gift. An appraisal by Sotheby's placed the value of this exquisite Russian rug at a surprising value. But the joy and memories given us by this dear lady make the value much greater in our heart

Adult Fiction—First Place

The Birdhouse

by Keith Schlaegel, Stockton, KS

The birdhouse was a soft brownish red, almost auburn.

I had wanted to paint it pink with yellow stars, but Mr. Wells had suggested the red color. He said the pink and yellow would scare the birds away.

I told him I didn't care. I wanted a pretty house for the birds, not one that was an ugly red. I left, stomping my feet hard on the ground, just to show him how mad I was.

Two days later I climbed back under the fence and Mr. Wells was sitting on his back porch steps. "Ya, come back Miss Annie," he said.

I nodded and he nodded back. "Want me to get the paint?" he asked.

I nodded once again and he went inside his house and came back with two cans.

"This here's the primer," he said. "It's the one that goes underneath. My Papa told me to always use primer. You don't see it, but he always said it was the important paint. The top paint is pretty, but the primer, that's the one that counts."

I nodded, but I was five years old and didn't know anything about primers and top coats. I would learn that someday, but when you're five years old and sneaking over to your neighbor's house to paint bird houses, making the house pretty was the important thing.

After we finished painting the house, Mr. Wells went inside and came back out with a drill and a piece of wood he called a dowel. It was an old fashioned drill and the bits were in the handle that you screwed off to get them out. There was a little handle with a crank that turned the gears to spin the drill bit. "We'll use this tomorrow after the paint dries," Mr. Wells said, handing me the dowel.

"What's it for?" I asked.

"It will be a perch for the birds. You put it right below the hole they go into and then they can sit outside and look around at things." Mr. Wells shrugged, "Don't really know what they would be looking at, just things in the world like we do."

Mr. Wells and I sat, staring at the birdhouse for a while and then he asked if I wanted a pop. "I'd like one," I told him, "but I don't think my momma would like that," She's always talking about pop and candy ruining my dinner. Mr. Wells nodded. "She's probably right," he said.

The paint on my hands gave me away. My mom saw the red paint and asked me how it had happened. I was quiet. Not because I had a problem with lying. I hadn't learned yet that lying to your mom ranked about even with getting caught sneaking candy from the cupboard or throwing rocks at the neighbor's dog. I just couldn't come up with a good lie.

I finally told her that Mr. Wells and I had built a bird house and painted it. We were going to make a place for the bird to sit the next day after the paint had dried.

My mom wasn't too happy. She asked me how I had gotten over to his house and I knew at that point to tell the truth.

"There's a hole in the fence," I told her. "I went over there and Mr. Wells asked me if I wanted to build a bird house."

"Well, you stay home. You don't need to be going over there and seeing him," she said.

The next day I went over to see if Mr. Wells was out in his yard and I saw that the hole in the fence had been fixed. I suspected my dad had done it, but knew better than to ask.

I didn't see Mr. Wells any more that summer until late August. I was in the back yard, looking for pine cones. My dad had told me he would give me a penny for every one I picked up and put in a bucket and I saw Mr. Wells come outside.

I waved at him and he waved back, then went into his house. He came back out carrying the birdhouse. It had the mysterious dowel he had told me about and a bent over nail in the top where a wire was attached.

"Look here, Miss Annie," he said. "Here's our birdhouse. You ready to hang it up?" I nodded, but stood where I was. My hole in the fence had been covered and it seemed like I had been told not to go into Mr. Wells's yard.

"I saw the hole was fixed, but if you walk down to the alley, I can let you in the gate. Then we can hang it up."

I knew there was something wrong about the whole idea, but the excitement of hanging a bird house was too much for me. Mr. Wells had set up a chair below a low hanging branch and he motioned to it.

"Up here Miss Annie, I'll let you hang it on the branch." I was holding the bird house, while Mr. Wells twisted the wire around the branch when I must have lost my balance and fell. I stuck out one hand to keep from hitting the ground and suddenly there was a sharp pain in my wrist.

I started crying. Not my normal cry, but loud sobs that started the dogs barking in the neighborhood. I looked up to see Mr. Wells standing over me. I didn't remember much after that. Looking back to your childhood is usually a series of snapshots, not a continuous memory, but just one remembrance then another.

The next snapshot was my mom taking me from Mr. Wells and saying in a tone of voice I had never heard her use before, "What did you do to her?"

I was told my wrist was broken in two places, but I didn't really remember that until I was reminded a few years later, fifth or sixth grade, that age when your memories are more like a short home movie than pictures from a Polaroid.

I wore a cast for much longer than I wanted and the cast started to have an odor. Clifford Johnston called me Stinky Annie.

The winter of my kindergarten year was snowy and cold. I didn't see Mr. Wells much through the early winter months. Once or twice he would be outside pushing snow with an old shovel and I would wave at him, but he must not have seen me because he didn't wave back. The only time I had a chance to talk to him that winter was on a windy, raw day. I had gone outside after school and was standing in our yard, watching birds hunkering down in the lilac bushes behind our garage. I would throw a rock at them and they would all fly away, but after a while one by one they would come back to the bush, seeking shelter behind the brown leaves. Mr. Wells came outside while I was watching the birds and I called out to him. At first I didn't think he had heard me, but then he lifted his head, slowly raised his arm, and then waved at me.

I walked to the fence, waiting until Mr. Wells came to the other side.

"Hi Mr. Wells," I said.

Mr. Wells looked towards my house, then nodded his head. "Hello, Miss Annie. I hope you're having a nice winter. Lots of snow so far. Early for that much snow. Good for making snow men and the like, isn't it?"

I nodded. "My hand is out of the cast," I said, holding up my arm. "See."

Mr. Wells nodded, then looked away. "Well, I gotta go now. You have a nice rest of the year."

He turned and started walking away.

"Hey, Mr. Wells," I hollered as he left. "If it snows again, how about you and me make a snowman. We could build it in my yard."

Mr. Wells stopped, then turned.

"Probably can't do that, Miss Annie. No...no I probably can't"

"I could ask my parents," I said. "If my mom said it's alright, maybe we could. She might give me some buttons for eyes, maybe a carrot."

My neighbor shook his head. "No, we probably can't be doin' that. We really ain't supposed to be talking, let alone us making snowmen."

"How come we ain't supposed to be talking," I asked.

Mr. Wells shook his head, started to say something, then turned and walked away.

It was the last time I saw my neighbor.

A couple of weeks later I saw the police car at Mr. Wells' house. Not long after that another car showed up that my brother told me was an ambulance. My brother and I watched through the curtains until my mom saw us and made us go sit at the kitchen table. When my dad came home they had a

quiet talk in the living room and dinner was mostly silent with everyone being more polite than they usually were.

The next day I asked my mother about the ambulance at Mr. Wells' house and she didn't say anything for a while, then said she would tell me later.

But she never did.

As time passed and I got older, my interests turned from birdhouses to pretty dresses, then to animals, boys and cars. After a while I didn't think much about Mr. Wells and no longer wondered what had happened to him.

Once when I was a senior in high school I asked my mother why nobody had moved into the house next door. She said she didn't really know, for some reason the family that owned it didn't want to sell. Then she nonchalantly told me that after Mr. Wells had killed himself she hadn't seen anyone over there except for maybe once or twice. The subject changed to something to do with what college I would attend the following year.

I had always suspected what had happened to Mr. Wells, but suicide is a hard concept to grasp at five years of age. I was just a child and didn't know yet what I would know later.

I hadn't learned that primer is what's underneath and is more important than what you can see on the outside; that insignificant things like a dowel rod can allow birds to view what is going on in the world around them and that a neighbor who calls you "Miss Annie", one your parents don't trust, could be sad enough to kill himself.

I didn't yet know those things we learn as we grow up.

Adult Essay – First Place

Cook Until You Drop

by Suzanne Waring, Great Falls, MT

It's what every cook in the household knows: There are twenty-one times each week that a meal is expected. With fifty-two weeks in the year, the household chef is going to cook 1,092 meals annually, and a few of those are likely to be feasts that take more than a few hours to prepare. Let's look at this dilemma even more tersely. If you are the cook, fixing meals three times a day will continue until the energy drains out and you collapse onto the kitchen floor. I can tell you that it's drudgery for those who would rather come to the table than to prepare the table, and I am one of those people.

When I was dating my husband, I had Sunday dinner with his family, which I always looked forward to because I was living in a college dormitory at the time and starving for a decent meal. One Sunday we had had a wonderful dinner with all of the trimmings. When evening rolled around, several in the family said, "I'm hungry. What's for supper?" I could tell that my future mother-in-law was tired and she procrastinated about getting back into the kitchen to fix another meal. At the time, I wondered why she was dragging her feet. Now I know why.

I have been fixing meals routinely for fifty-two years, and normally I try to keep the facts and figures in the darkest, hard-to-reach corner of my mind because they're daunting. This, however, all became sharply distinct recently when several men in my family put a new roof on a large shop building. It was my job to keep them fortified for at least the noon and evening meal. It was like feeding a hay crew when I was a girl on a Kansas farm. When the fellows came in, they were hungry, and the food disappeared. I had to start over with a new idea twice a day.

Over the years as I have gained experience at this time-sucking task. I have learned what dishes my husband and sons call "gour-met delights." I do avoid cooking those gooey creations with the vegetables and protein mixed together that make my taste buds shout for joy and stand-up in attention.

I have learned to use new products. My mother never bought an avocado, yogurt, or hoisin sauce to augment her cuisine. She had the staples, iceberg lettuce, and home-canned vegetables to work with. In the years since she was the major cook in my life, produce has gotten more healthy and diverse, and ingredients are unlimited.

I also have a cooking mentor. My sister-in-law sends me recipes she has found to be successful with my brother, so I know they will work with my husband.

My seventeen-dollar slow cooker is the distressed cook's best friend. I use it at least twice a week, and hearty soups for winter evening meals have become a favorite. A recent discovery of recipes for homemade frozen dinners that are plopped into the slow cooker just before the cook goes out the door in the morning and are ready when evening rolls around has just made my life easier. I have found that it's not the preparing but the deciding what to fix with the ingredients that are on hand to be the most arduous about cooking—all the more reason to make up those homemade, frozen slow-cooker recipes.

I think what drives me most to cook is that I personally get hungry, and I know that no one else will do the cooking. If my husband tried, I wouldn't like what he cooked. I know because I have been out of commission from time to time.

Even with these tricks, I find cooking a nightmare that forever hangs over my head. As of late, I have had a revelation that I think is going to sustain me. As I am frantically trying to get a meal on the table, I look over to see my husband who is sitting in a chair and waiting expectantly. I can choose to get steamed up about this scenario, or I can look at it differently. Lately I have come to realize that he is waiting to take part in a celebration—be it a mini celebration now that there's only two of us. Even when I put the main dish on the table in a skillet, he still looks at coming to the table as a break in the day, good conversation, and time to do something he enjoys. Thinking of mealtime as a celebration has helped me to fix a nice table with matching dinnerware and a good meal. I hope this state of mind will keep me going until that day when I smack that kitchen floor.